



KENTUCKY Council

on postsecondary education

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Thomas D. Layzell
President

April 1, 2005

Edward Kifer
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Dear Skip:

Thank you for your letter regarding the Council's Statewide Placement Policy. Given my respect for your expertise in this area, I regret your immediate negative reaction and take it very seriously. I will try to address some of your concerns.

This policy was developed by faculty representatives designated by the chief academic officer of each of Kentucky's public colleges and universities. The core of the policy is not the ACT threshold scores themselves but the skills that are now specified (and agreed on by representatives of all our public postsecondary institutions) indicating readiness for college-level work. The K-12 sector has worked with learning standards for quite some time, and we are grateful for the opportunity that Kentucky's participation in the American Diploma Project gave our postsecondary faculty to clarify what, precisely, they expect incoming freshmen to know and be able to do. (As an aside, these entry-level expectations also will enable our developmental faculty to clarify appropriate remedial course outcomes.)

Our reliance on the ACT came about for several reasons. First, Kentucky's colleges and universities, like those in most southern states, already use the ACT in their admissions and placement deliberations. Is it the only component of these deliberations? Of course not. High school grade point averages, recommendations, application essays, and interviews are among the elements on which admissions decisions are based. ACT scores already serve as a trigger mechanism for most institutions, where a student scoring below a given level is offered additional placement assessment to determine the best learning option. Our institutions have simply agreed on a uniform level.

The Council's policy is not designed to calibrate levels of remediation, nor is it an admissions policy. Our institutions use multiple means for making decisions of both sorts. The purpose of this policy is to define a standard of "readiness for college" to preclude the type of second-guessing to which too many first-time college goers are subject. Our faculty agreed on a set of gateway skills, compared them to the ACT's *Standards for Transition*, and established a score level at or above which a student will be guaranteed placement in credit-bearing coursework. Entering students with lower scores can always have a second chance. The policy is all carrot and no stick. Our faculty's pragmatic judgment is confirmed by research conducted by the ACT across the nation. Students earning a score of 18 in English and 22 in mathematics have a 75 percent likelihood of earning a grade of C or higher and a 50 percent likelihood of earning a B or higher in their first year of college English or algebra.

As for use of the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System scores, you know, no doubt better than I, that the matrix design of the CATS is designed to assess schools and districts, not individual students. Its multiple test forms preclude determining, by an individual student's score, the array of that student's skills. The National Technical Advisory Panel has repeatedly advised against using CATS scores for any purpose other than for overall school and district accountability and for that reason does not favor even placing CATS scores on individual student transcripts. We are working with the Kentucky Department of Education to ensure that the next phase of K-12 assessment includes student level accountability that we can use to determine college readiness.

You are concerned about the place of probability and statistics in the Statewide Placement Policy. While probability and statistics are unarguably important, there are no remedial courses in these subjects at the college level. Their basic concepts and operations can be taught relatively easily at the college level, and in many institutions they are taught within one or more disciplinary contexts in the social sciences. In contrast, some skills in geometry and algebraic functions are required at both two- and four-year institutions and in most skilled trades. Both teachers and incoming students need to know which skills are emphasized and assessed in Kentucky and elsewhere for placement into credit-bearing coursework at the postsecondary level.

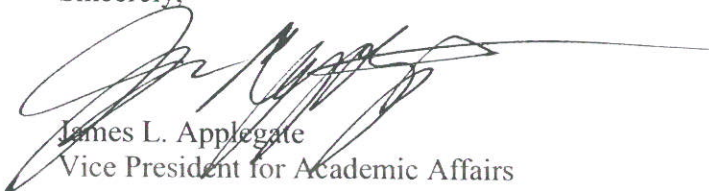
Finally, you mention the placement policy's reference to mathematics and correctly attribute the unstated reference to Clifford Adelman's 1999 study, *Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment*. While you may not agree with Dr. Adelman's conclusions, they are more specific than what appear in the summary abstract you consulted. Let me draw your attention to the "Selected Findings" section near the beginning of the study (<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/Toolbox/toolbox.html>). The third bullet under "High School Background" reads:

Of all pre-college curricula, the highest level of mathematics one studies in secondary school has the strongest continuing influence on bachelor's degree completion. Finishing a course beyond the level of Algebra 2 (for example, trigonometry or pre-calculus) more than doubles the odds that a student who enters postsecondary education will complete a bachelor's degree.

The study addresses this issue early on in the section labeled "HIGHMATH: Getting Beyond Algebra 2" and can be found within the following hyperlink:
<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/Toolbox/PartI.html>

I hope I have addressed your concerns, Skip. We are proud that our postsecondary institutions in Kentucky have been able to move beyond appeals to institutional uniqueness and articulated clear expectations for postsecondary readiness, just as our K-12 colleagues have been able to articulate standards of readiness for earlier grades. We have been invited to other states to help them do the same.

Sincerely,



James L. Applegate
Vice President for Academic Affairs

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